

Weigh of Life...Taking Action Together

Project Overview

Cultural Perspectives of Childhood Overweight Among Hispanic WIC Participants in Massachusetts 2001 USDA WIC Special Project Grant

The goal of this project was to increase the ability of the Massachusetts WIC Program nutrition staff to provide services that promote healthy eating and physical activity behaviors to prevent overweight in Hispanic (Puerto Rican and Dominican) children, among which the problem of overweight is particularly acute.

The project included: 1) collection of anthropometric and body composition measures of approximately 400 children, 2) identification of beliefs, diet environment, growth, and body image of approximately 300 mothers (through 24 focus groups), 3) development of educational messages and materials for WIC counselors and healthcare providers to utilize in their efforts to prevent childhood overweight, and 4) identification of culturally-sensitive key themes related to health, weight and overweight.

Focus Group Findings

- Most mothers know that children under the age of five can be overweight; mothers are not aware that weight and eating patterns established early in life are directly related to lifelong health, including weight status.
- Barriers mothers experience to prevent overweight in their children
 - lack of control over their child's diet
 - diet counseling ignores cultural eating patterns
 - appearance of an overweight child means their child is healthy
 - feelings of hopelessness and denial in dealing with overweight
 - lack of money and time to prepare healthy foods and meals
 - conflicting messages regarding weight between doctors and WIC
- Mothers expect their physician to talk to them about their child's weight; if the doctor doesn't, mothers assume the child's weight is healthy and at a normal, recommended weight.
- Mothers feel they are good mothers when they can offer food to their children that they like and will eat.
- Mothers want to discuss the weight of their child in a way that
 - expresses care and concern for their child
 - validates them as a good mother
 - treats their child individually
 - is based on factual evidence
 - is consistently interpreted the same way by their health care provider and WIC nutritionist

Anthropometric Assessment Findings:

- Larger-than-expected proportions of at-risk-for-overweight and overweight occur in all groups of children.
- Children are over-fat, not just overweight.
- Weight control is an issue for all children, all ethnicities; the problem is most acute in Dominican and Puerto Rican children.